History of Polish Jews, Postwar Years, from 1944 to the Present

By Stanisław Krajewski

This is the last chapter form the catalogue of the exhibition in the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, POLIN, in Warsaw. It covers the history of Jews in Poland after World War II. In the preparation of the English version I was greatly assisted by Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. In the catalogue, this text is complemented by many illustrations and extensive captions written by me and several other authors who had worked on this section of the core exhibition. (Page numbers refer to the catalogue.)

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"Were there any Jews left in Poland after the war?" – most Jews from outside of Poland will ask in disbelief. And they won't be the only ones asking. The answer is: Yes, there were. And there are. And yet the disbelief is not unfounded. The postwar period cannot compare with the period before the war when the number of Jews and the scope of Jewish life in Poland were so much greater. Today Jews are few and often so deeply assimilated that they are hardly "Jewish." Nonetheless, individuals who are Jewish or "of Jewish origin" are increasingly visible, while Jewish subjects attract ever greater interest, which can be either positive or anti-Semitic, sometimes obsessively. The best catchphrase for the postwar period is "small numbers, big presence" – the number of Jews may be small, but Jewish presence in Polish consciousness is big. Despite the Holocaust and waves of postwar emigration, the history of Polish Jews did not come to an end, but rather a new chapter, however small, joins that thousand-year history.

Destruction, devastation, death. Loneliness, uncertainty, fear. This is what Jews in Poland faced after the war. The will to live and to find a place for oneself in the world prevailed. Jews faced difficult choices during the immediate postwar years and in the decades that followed. To stay or leave? To be a Jew or not? Whether their native language was Yiddish or Polish, whether they were steeped in Jewish culture or knew nothing about it, they made choices, which affected their own lives and Jewish life more generally.

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To Stay or to Leave: 1944–1948

Poverty and homelessness, hunger and disease were the order of the day. Violence was rife as a result of wartime demoralization, easy access to weapons, civil war, and banditry. That said, Jews were particularly vulnerable. Their lives had been worth little during the war, and they suffered from violence, sometimes just because they were Jews, immediately after the war. Having lost their loved ones and finding themselves unwelcome in their hometowns, they were alone and out of place. All Jews without exception had to find a new place for themselves. The elation of having survived was tempered by grief. "How does one start a life when all that's behind is just death?" asked Władysław Szpilman, the celebrated pianist, who had miraculously survived. Most Jews emigrated. They saw no way to re-establish their lives in Poland, which had become one vast cemetery, although not all felt this way. As one person recalled, "Others left because they claimed Poland was the land of the graves of their loved ones. I felt otherwise. Since Poland is where the graves of my loved ones are, it is my land, and that's why I never wanted to leave it."

Of the 3.3 million Jews living in Poland before the war, only about 10 percent survived. Some of them survived in hiding and others in concentration camps, but most made it through the war in the Soviet Union. Despite the hardships, the chances of survival there were incomparably greater than under the German occupation. Most of the 250,000 to 300,000 Jews who found themselves in Poland just after the war left. About 150,000 emigrated in 1945–1946, and by 1947 only a minority remained.

The map of Poland was redrawn as a result of agreements between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union at Yalta. Poland lost territory in the east to the Soviet Union and gained territory in the west from Germany. The redrawing of borders led to massive relocations of population. By the war's end, more than 7 million Germans had been evacuated or expelled from the "Recovered Territories," namely, Silesia, Pomerania, and Masuria, and the emptied territory was filled with most of the 2 million Poles returning from the Soviet Union (among them 180,000 Jews), Poles from Central Poland, and 140,000 Ukrainians from southeastern Poland. Although many Poles regretted the loss of Vilna and Lwów, they generally considered the expulsion of Germans as a just consequence of a war that Germany had started. Poland was now smaller in territory and population, and far more homogeneous than ever before. The Yalta agreements had placed Poland within the Soviet sphere of

influence. Communists dependent on Moscow gradually monopolized power, terrorized Polish society, and rigged elections. They nationalized industry and took over factories, instituted agricultural reform and redistributed land seized from landowners to peasants.

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From the outset, the most important task facing individual Jews and the newly established Jewish committees was to find surviving relatives and friends. People placed announcements in the Jewish press and in Red Cross publications in Poland and abroad. . More than 200,000 Jews filled out registration forms provided by Jewish committees. Some survivors did not register. Among them were highly assimilated individuals who did not think of themselves as Jews. Some had passed as Poles during the war and stayed with their wartime identities in the years that followed. Some had married Poles and left their Jewish past behind. Many continued to fear antisemitism and kept their Jewish origins secret.

Everyone faced the dilemma of whether to stay or to leave. Reasons to stay included one's family situation, education and work prospects, and love of Polish language and culture. Reasons to leave included the pain of living in a cemetery, fear of antisemitism, and unwillingness to live under communism. Zionists and those who sympathized with Zionism wanted to go to Palestine; others would go anywhere. However, most countries had imposed strict quotas on immigration. As a result, most survivors landed in displaced persons camps, mainly in the American and British occupation zones in Germany and Austria. Many languished there for years waiting for the chance to emigrate. Some Jews left Poland illegally, although with the tacit consent of the Polish and Soviet authorities – indeed, it was even possible, as a result, to organize military training in Bolków in Lower Silesia for future defenders of the Jewish state. However, the British closed immigration to Palestine, intercepted ships bound for Israel, and sent those on board to internment camps on Cyprus and elsewhere. Only communists had a ready answer for Polish Jews: a new and better world in Poland to be created together with the Soviet Union.

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Only rarely could Jews go back to their former homes, since those now living there considered the absence of their prewar owners an accomplished fact and consequence of the German occupation. Polish neighbors therefore treated the return of Jews as an "invasion," and Jews who tried to return put their lives at risk. A report written during the war by a member of the Polish underground for the London government-in-exile had already predicted this would happen. Moreover, violence was endemic. Dispersed units of the anti-communist

underground attacked not only officials of the government apparatus, but also Jews, whom they considered “Commie Jews”, based on a common perception dating back to the early 20th century. In addition, Jews wanting to return to their hometowns looked to the new authorities, and initially to the Soviet army, as their only guarantee of safety. This, too, contributed to the identification of Jews and communism, as did the prominence of individuals of Jewish origin in the highest echelons of the communist regime. Countless leaflets identified Jews with the communists.

As a result, Jews preferred to settle in large cities such as Łódź and Warsaw or in the former German territories, where everyone was newly arrived. The Central Committee of Jews in Poland was established right after the war in Łódź, which served as Poland’s capital, until Warsaw, which lay in ruins, recovered. Warsaw soon attracted functionaries in the state administration as well as intelligentsia active in both Polish and Jewish cultural life. Faculty who had taught at Lwów University before the war found a place at the University of Wrocław, which had just reopened. It was also more possible to recover one’s property through legal action in cities than in towns – Herszel Sokołowski was able to recover his parents’ home in Kielce in March 1946. Quite often, those who recovered their homes would immediately sell them at a low price before leaving the country.

Young Jews living in a kibbutz in Kielce were preparing to leave for Palestine when a pogrom broke out on 4 July 1946. More than 40 people were brutally murdered by a mob that believed that Jews had kidnapped a Christian child and murdered him for his blood. As news of the pogrom spread, the authorities, the underground, and the Catholic Church variously blamed the anti-communists, the communists, or even Jews themselves, citing their prominence in the communist power apparatus. Emigration panic followed. Theater director Aleksander Bardini recalled that when he first heard news of the Kielce pogrom on the radio, he fled Poland without finishing his shave. He returned after several years, and became a respected Polish theater artist and educator of successive generations of actors.

Those Jews who stayed in Poland were hopeful that communism would deliver a more just society and bring an end to antisemitism. On 22 July 1944, the Polish Committee of National Liberation, Poland’s new Soviet-imposed government, proclaimed its manifesto in Lublin: “We guarantee that Jews, who were being exterminated by the occupier in a bestial fashion, will be able to rebuild their lives, and will have full equality, in law and in fact.” For Jews,

these were words of hope and reason for Jewish organizations to support the new regime. A convention of Ihud, the largest Polish Zionist organization, stated: "Never before has Poland had a government that would have so much understanding of the needs and aspirations of Jews." Whether they intended to stay or leave, Jews tried to rebuild Jewish life in Poland. They set up orphanages and schools and organized vocational and trade courses. Jewish communists enthusiastically subscribed to the official ideology of "productivization" – making Jews into workers – while Zionists also organized agricultural training and other courses to prepare future pioneers for the Land of Israel, just as they had done before the war.

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Jewish activists wanted to recreate prewar Jewish parties and institutions. Until 1948, a relatively liberal period, Jewish life was astonishingly diverse, despite the refusal of the authorities to legalize the Zionist right wing and the Agudas Yisroel, the religious party. Although the communists were growing in strength thanks to government backing, the Zionists enjoyed wider Jewish support. After the experience of the Holocaust, Zionism seemed more reasonable even to those who had opposed the movement before the war. Left and center Zionists, religious Zionists (Mizrachi) – indeed nearly all Jews passionately – followed developments in Palestine and staked their hopes on the emergence of a Jewish state. Religious institutions became weaker, as they were out of step with the secular nature of communist ideology.

The most important Jewish institution during the immediate postwar years was the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (CKŻP), which addressed virtually all aspects of Jewish life – schools, housing, employment, orphanages, health care, social welfare, culture, and emigration. *Dos naye lebn* (New Life), the title of its newspaper, captures the organization's mission – to rebuild Jewish life anew.

One of its departments, the Central Jewish Historical Commission, was dedicated to the documentation of wartime experiences. Its first director was Filip Friedman. A special protocol was developed for gathering testimonies from children. The publications resulting from their efforts to gather testimony and other evidence, to mention only those prepared by Michał Borwicz, remain haunting reading to this day. Jewish historians also testified at German war crime trials – the most famous was that of Rudolf Höss, the commander of Auschwitz, who was hanged there. Executions were initially public, a holdover from the war, but this practice was soon discontinued. Coming to terms with the legacy of the war also

meant restoring dignity to the victims. Bodies were exhumed and given proper burial. Not only human remains, but also hundreds of meters of desecrated Torah scrolls were buried in accordance with religious law. Monuments were created in memory of those who perished, and memorial ceremonies were held in many places.

The Central Committee of Jews in Poland, headed by Zionist Emil Sommerstein, a Zionist, was initially more pluralistic. In 1946, leadership passed to the left-wing Zionist Adolf Berman. His brother, Jakub Berman, led the "ideological front" of Poland's Communist Party during the Stalinist period. In 1949, with the appointment of Hersz Smolar as head of the CKŻP, communists came to dominate the organization. Before the banning of debate, the main topic of discussion was whether to stay or leave. By 1949, freedom of debate had ended. *Ibergang*, a Yiddish newspaper published by Polish Jews in displaced persons camps, was skeptical about the prospect of "new life" for Jews in Poland: "In Poland a new national Jewish life is being rebuilt. These are not signs of new life, but red blotches on the face of a hopeless invalid. This is a 'new life,' but in inverted commas. A new life without inverted commas does not exist." Mordka Libhaber summed up his feelings in *Ibergang* in 1947: "We haven't betrayed Poland, but Poland has betrayed us! ... The glorious chapter of Jewish history in the Polish diaspora has ended."

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1949–1968: Jewish Life Under Communism

The communists gradually concentrated all power in their hands. The leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party, which was founded in December 1948, effectively ruled the country. Jewish communists who entered the new party included not only activists at the state level and members of the Jewish fraction of the Polish Workers' Party (PPR), but also many members of the Bund, the Jewish labor movement, which was leftist although traditionally anti-communist. Not all Bundists joined: Marek Edelman, a young but already distinguished member of the Bund, one of the leaders of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, kept his distance. When he eventually entered the political arena 30 years later, it was to oppose the communists.

After 1948, Stalinization brought an end to all organizations and initiatives that were independent of the government, and Jewish communists oversaw the liquidation of nearly all Jewish organizations. Only the Catholic Church maintained a degree of autonomy, although

that too would soon be severely curbed, and Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, the Primate of Poland, would be interned. Jewish religious life became even weaker. Leaders such as Rabbi David Kahane, who was also chief rabbi of the Polish army, emigrated, and religious congregations were coerced into joining the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, a humiliation because CKŻP made a point of being secular. Meanwhile, the state administered the Religious Union of the Mosaic Faith, founded in 1949, because its statute was not approved until 1961. The numbers tell the story: there were 41 congregations in 1949, half as many as in 1947, 43 functioning synagogues and houses of prayer, and 49 active cemeteries out of over 1000 Jewish cemeteries within Poland's new borders. These cemeteries, however, should remain undisturbed indefinitely, according to Jewish religious law. Without Jews too take care of all of them, what would be their fate?

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Under Stalinism, emigration permits were not issued, and Poland's borders were sealed. However, with the establishment of Israel in 1948 and pressure of many Zionists eager to immigrate to the new Jewish state, the Polish authorities consented in 1949 to controlled emigration of "activists of all Zionist parties as well as of those wishing to leave socialist Poland as it constructs itself, namely: private entrepreneurs, the elderly, invalids, rabbis and religious Jews." Registering for emigration was announced, and about 30,000 Jews left Poland between 1949 and 1951. Consistent with Party guidelines, members of the "professional intelligentsia and working class" were refused permission to leave and, in the years that followed, emigration was closed for Jews, as it was for all Poles.

With the political liberalization of 1956, known as the Thaw, emigration became possible again, and some among those who had not managed or not wanted to leave earlier seized this new opportunity. Some left in response to growing antisemitism, fueled by the widespread belief that Jews were to blame for Stalinism. After 1956, about 250,000 Polish citizens were repatriated from the Soviet Union, among them 18,000 Jews. At least two-thirds of the Jewish repatriates soon moved on to Israel or to the West. By 1960, some 50,000 Jews had left Poland. As a result, those who stayed either could not leave for various personal reasons or simply wanted to stay. Many were deeply assimilated or still believed in communism or had married into Polish families. Whatever their reasons for staying, they saw their future in Poland.

The Social-Cultural Society of Jews in Poland (TSKŻ) was established in 1950 and remained the only Jewish organization permitted in Poland until 1989, except for synagogues, whose role in Jewish life was limited. In keeping with official Stalinist policy more generally, Jewish public life was to be "socialist in content, national in form." As a result, TSKŻ promoted Yiddish language and culture, and people came to TSKŻ clubs to speak Yiddish with one another. Those wanting to speak Hebrew had nowhere to go – Hebrew was associated with Zionism and Judaism, and the teaching of Hebrew was prohibited. The Soviet Union supported Israel for a short of time, but soon treated it as an "imperialist" state allied with the United States. Jewish communists continued their usual polemics with Zionists and religious Jews, but since they monopolized power, there was no debate.

With the Thaw of 1956, TSKŻ communists had to confront the critique of Stalinist "distortions." Soviet Jewish writers, members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, had been condemned to death in the secret trials of 1952. Their murders came as a shock to the communists who dominated TSKŻ. Stalin's fanatical antisemitism toward the end of his life – he died in 1953 – was obvious to anyone who could see through the propaganda, but the failure of the TSKŻ communists to see the truth weakened the standing of TSKŻ among Jews. Although there was anti-Jewish feeling in the Communist Party during the early 1950s, there were never any events in Poland like the accusation in the Soviet Union that Jewish doctors killed state figures, or like the 1952 show trial in Czechoslovakia of Rudolf Slansky, the equivalent of Jakub Berman in Poland, namely a high ranking Communist of Jewish origin, who was accused of Zionism and Trotskyism.

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The strengthening of the grip of Stalinism struck a significant blow to Jewish life with the banning of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint) from Poland on 1 January 1950. The Joint had been subsidizing all Jewish institutions, including schools, orphanages, courses, and publications, as well as the emigration process, since the end of the war. In the 1950s, the state took over the financing of these institutions, thereby also gaining complete control over them – Jewish communists saw this as a positive development, as they had dreamed of the state financing all Jewish schools even before the war. The Joint returned to Poland in 1956, during the Thaw, and continued to support Jewish institutions and individuals until 1967, when its activities were again banned. The Joint supported Jewish life in all its shapes and forms, including the desire for contacts with Israel, which went against the official line, but continued to see Poland above all as a center of Yiddish.

Indeed, during the 1950s and 1960s, Yidish-Bukh published dozens of books in Yiddish each year and became the second most important publishing houses of its kind in the world at the time. The Yiddish theater, also financed by the state, held an even more prominent place in Jewish life. It performed initially in Łódź and Wrocław, relocating to Warsaw in 1955. The Yiddish theater achieved a high level of professionalism under Ida Kamińska, who had begun her acting career some 50 years earlier – her mother, Esther Rachel Kamińska, known as the mother of Yiddish theater, had tutored Ida as a child. Given that almost no one went to the synagogue and knowledge of Yiddish was in decline, the Yiddish theater was for many who attended their most Jewish experience. Visitors from abroad recalled that when Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, was recited on stage as part of the play, the audience took it as actual praying, not acting. To reach the young and non-Jewish audiences, the theater introduced headsets with translation into Polish. Although, most of the actors left Poland in 1968, the theater, unlike Yidish-Bukh, survived and continues to perform to this day.

In the 1950s and 1960s, war subjects came to the fore in Polish culture more generally. Nearly every film was about the war. The Holocaust also became the subject of many paintings, books, and films, despite the persistence of some taboos, such as talking about the violence of Poles against their Jewish neighbors or the appropriation of former Jewish property. Andrzej Brzozowski's *By the Railway Track*, a short film based on a well-known story by Zofia Nałkowska, is about a Jewish woman who broke her leg escaping from a transport to Treblinka. The film does not portray Page 374 hostility towards her, but rather the helplessness of those witnessing her tragedy, although she is shot in the end. Nonetheless, the film, which was made in 1963, was held back by the censor and spent the next 30 years collecting dust.

To be sure, not only Jewish artists also dealt with the Holocaust. Already in 1947, Julian Przyboś, a leader of the poetic avant-garde, wrote: "Until I carry the burden of this most terrifying subject in even a single word of poetry, I cannot feel free as a poet." In 1964, Adam Haupt and Franciszek Duszenko unveiled their memorial at Treblinka – a vast field of unhewn stones inscribed with the names of the towns and cities from which the victims came. The International Auschwitz Committee, which organized a competition for a monument at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1957, proceeded on the assumption that citizens of many different countries had been killed there, but overlooked the fact that the vast majority of them

were Jews, and, what is more, they perished there precisely because they were Jews. Not until 1989 was this fact given its proper emphasis, though it was never denied.

The period after 1956 saw the rise of a more moderate regime, a certain openness to the outside world, and cultural developments outside the ideological bounds of communism. It was also the period of the so-called "small stabilization." People tried to settle into their lives, resigning themselves to the system as a given, while dismissing its ideology.

During the 1960s, young people born or raised after the war were coming of age. Young Jews growing up in Polish culture did not differ substantially from their Polish peers. Some parents sent their children to Jewish summer camps organized by TSKŻ, where they could spend time with other Jews and be exposed to Jewish heritage, something that many parents were not able to transmit. Young people loved these summers, despite the pervasiveness of communist propaganda. The youth culture emerging in the United States and Western Europe appealed to virtually all young people in Poland. Jewish youth started rock bands imitating the Beatles and performed at TSKŻ clubs, attracting Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike. They were part of youth countercultural in Poland, which put Page 377 forward not only countercultural values, but also the officially sanctioned principles of socialism – equality, justice, freedom, respect for the working class – while criticizing conditions of life in socialist Poland. The majority of young dissidents who gathered around Adam Michnik, later a leader of anticommunist opposition, were children of communists, often from Jewish backgrounds. They wanted to understand why the ideals and reality of socialism were so far apart. The Jewish Babel club in Warsaw attracted some young people who were also active in the wider student protest movement, which struggled above all for freedom of expression.

The presence of Jews in the protest movement was manipulated in 1968 by government propaganda designed to discredit the student protests by portraying them as incited by Jews in the interest of Jews. "It is no coincidence that the great majority of the organizers of the troubles at Warsaw University, who belong to the group surrounding Modzelewski, Kuroń, Michnik – Szlajfer – Dajczgewand, and so forth, are all of Jewish extraction," declared *Nasza Walka* (Our Fight), the Union of Socialist Youth magazine. Did the circle of young members of the opposition at Warsaw University, who were known as the "commandos," merit being labeled a Jewish group? Many were indeed of Jewish origin, but they were not a Jewish group – Jewishness was not a criterion of membership and had nothing to do with their goals.

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As a symbol, "March 1968" spans a longer period during which the movement of students and intelligentsia against censorship gained momentum. At the same time a new generation of officials inside the communist party attempted to seize positions occupied by the old guard, often prewar communists, many of them Jews or individuals with family connections to Jews. The Arab-Israeli Six Day War in June 1967 prompted an antisemitic campaign – also against officials of Jewish origin. They were accused of being pro-Israel, although most Poles supported Israel, but the official government policy was pro-Soviet and therefore pro-Arab. The Six-Day War provided a pretext for a new generation of officials inside the Communist Party to seize positions occupied by the old guard, often prewar communists, many of them Jews or individuals with family connections to Jews. Adam Michnik aptly defined the goal of the March 1968 campaign: to gain support for communist power by anchoring it in the traditions of the Polish extreme right. It was an enterprise doomed to failure, because it demanded, on the one hand, recognizing the supremacy of Moscow, and on the other, affirming Polish anti-Russian and anti-Soviet traditions.

One of the most prominent outcome of the March campaign was the emigration of Jews. More than 13,000 left Poland bearing a "travel document" stating that its holder was "not a Polish citizen." Although formally one had to declare that one's destination was Israel, only a little over 3,000 actually went there. Most ended up in Sweden and Denmark, where they were granted political refugee status. All left feeling injured. They were humiliated by the emigration procedures. They felt that they were being forced out of a country they had never intended to leave.

The number of March emigrants seem almost trifling when compared with earlier waves of Jewish emigrations from Poland during the postwar years, but the effects were devastating – not only for Jewish life in Poland, which was shattered, but also for Poland as a nation. A large group of educated people – scholars, journalists, and artists – vanished. The face of Polish science would doubtless be different today had they stayed in the country. Some, like the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, rose to fame in Western academia. Bauman was once active in politics and believed in Stalinism, but later opposed it. Other emigrants, like the chemistry professor Józef Hurwic, editor of *Problemy*, Poland's most important popular science magazine, distanced themselves from politics.

Reflecting back on the twenty years that preceded March 1968: was it the case, as some have claimed and continue to claim to this day, that Jews effectively ruled Poland? After the war, those who became part of the power elite were those who had been communists before the war, and they were most likely to have survived the war deep in the heart of the Soviet Union. Jews were among them, but as communists not as Jews. The high percentage of Jews was not intended.

Although Jewish origin may not have been relevant, everyone took note of it. According to a note by President Bierut in 1945, Jews occupied 67 of the 500 senior positions in the security apparatus, and according to recent research, Jews filled about 30 percent of senior positions in the security apparatus between 1944 and 1956. Would events have evolved any differently had someone else occupied these positions? Since the aims and methods of a communist official did not differ depending on his or her religious or ethnic origins, the answer is no. As the Italian ambassador Eugenio Reale observed, Jews in senior positions of power "exhibit no special interest with regard to the fate of their coreligionists."

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Consider a report from July 1949 in which Lebedev, the Soviet ambassador to Poland, noted that at the Ministry of Public Security "from deputy ministers to department heads, there is not a single Pole. There are only Jews." Having in mind an anti-Jewish operation already underway in Russia, the ambassador added: "It is not yet the moment for a comprehensive solution in the fight against Jewish nationalism in the Polish party." There were Jews among the ruling Stalinists, to mention only Jakub Berman and Hilary Minc, but there were also Jewish critics of Stalinism, like the members of the anti-Stalinist *Puławianie* group, and there were Jews among anti-communists. What to make of Józef Światło, a high-ranking communist official who fled to the West in 1953 and revealed the methods used by the government of the People's Republic of Poland in his famous broadcasts on Radio Free Europe? Who should be seen as representing Jews? The gifted poet Arnold Słucki? He wrote of Stalinist Poland:

"In our hands we hold crowbar and pen,
Our dreams weigh down our eyelids,
We are building with iron and song,
A house in which a man can live."

Słucki was eventually disillusioned with Stalinism. Or Hugo Steinhaus, a leading mathematician, who never believed in communism? As he noted in his diary: "While on the

tram, we see the words everywhere . . . peace, norms, Korea, Stalin, fraternal friendship, undertakings, Michurin, heroes of communist labor . . . it all comes together in one symphony of nonsense and falsehood."

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Absence: 1969–1989

The emigration of March 1968 was the last wave of Jewish emigration from Poland. As a result, only 10 percent of the 10 percent of Polish Jews who survived the war ended up staying in Poland. By this time, some twenty five years since the war, most of them were thoroughly polonized. The March campaign had brought their Jewish origins to the fore, and they had to reflect on who they were in light of this new knowledge. The result was a crisis of assimilation. Some discovered their origins only when their parents informed them that they would be leaving the country "on Jewish papers." Those young Jews who stayed in Poland had to deal with their parents belief that Jewish origins were of no importance in their past and of no relevance in their present lives. But, this was an illusion. As the writer and critic Artur Sandauer wrote: "It is essentially impossible to have an indifferent attitude towards one's Jewishness. One can either deny it, or display it." Parents might deny it, but if their children wanted to display it, what options did they have? Thoroughly immersed in Polish culture and active in the wider society, assimilated Jews were not attracted to TSKŻ, which promoted Yiddish language and culture, nor to religious congregations, which were Orthodox and served a small circle of followers.

A new era dawned in the history of Jews in Poland after 1968. Jewish organizations were in crisis, with few leaders and members. TSKŻ clubs and synagogues largely drew older people, and there was a pervasive feeling of decline. Intergenerational transmission of Jewish culture and values was rare. The children of Jewish activists had either left Poland or were living their Polish lives away from the Jewish world. But, at the same time, there was growing interest in Jewish topics. It is the period after 1968 that is best described as "small numbers, big presence," although the catchphrase is relevant even after 1989.

Jews were not visible in public life in the 1970s, and mention of Jews in public discourse was censored, with the exception of wartime accounts. Hanna Krall's book *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* (Shielding the Flame), an interview with Marek Edelman, made a deep impression in intellectual circles. Edelman recalled the hopeless fight in the ghetto in astonishingly

antiheroic tones, whilst speaking passionately about the hope he felt as a cardiologist every time he saved a patient's life. Some of the greatest artists in Polish culture extended the attention on the war to include reflections on the absence of Jews and the fading memory of them, to mention only Jerzy Ficowski's heart-rending poetry: "only the hubbub of such silence, only the tumult of the wilderness, a dense crowd of nobody."

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Jewish topics other than ones related to the Holocaust began to appear in the 1970s, when intellectuals in the political opposition began issuing underground publications. A turning point came in 1980–1981 with Solidarity, which was formally a trade union with millions of members, but actually an anti-communist movement. It was only martial law that drove Solidarity underground. During the period when Solidarity was legal, censorship was eased, and topics that had been taboo, including Jewish ones, were taken up in public life. The 1946 Kielce pogrom was written about for the first time in more than 30 years. While it seemed that Solidarity could pretty much address even the most difficult questions concerning Jewish matters, the state authorities continued to hold antisemitic attitudes and to charge the opposition with "Jewishness" as a way of discrediting it. Yet, anti-Jewish attitudes also surfaced within Solidarity itself. Shortly before the introduction of martial law, Marian Jurczyk, the leader of Solidarity in Szczecin, stated: "Some people care for their own nation. Our rulers don't, because three-quarters of them are Jews, traitors . . . to Poland." This type of thinking was not typical of Solidarity's policies.

In 1983, the martial law government organized official commemorations of the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising and invited numerous guests from abroad, a ploy for gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the West. An international academic conference was also held, and the renovated Nożyk Synagogue was opened with similar intentions. Polish Jews in the opposition refused to take part in the official ceremonies and attended instead the simultaneous illegal demonstration that took place at the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes. Marek Edelman was held back by the police, and Janusz Onyszkiewicz, the press spokesman for Solidarity, declared in his speech: "We believe that if the ghetto fighters were alive, they would be with us." He was subsequently arrested. In 1988 the winds of change were already blowing strong. Fear of the authorities had largely disappeared. The unofficial commemorations of the 45th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising were much larger than the official one, bringing together many people associated with the opposition. The unofficial commemorations took place along the recently completed Jewish Memorial Route,

which led to the Umschlagplatz, the place from which the transports bound for Treblinka had departed in 1942.

Public discourse about Jews in the 1980s was ideologically and politically charged. Activists on different sides of the barricade wanted to show that they had Jews on their side. As for Jews themselves, some young Poles with Jewish roots felt that although they identified with the political opposition and the fight for human rights, their needs could not be met on these terms alone. They wanted to learn more about Judaism and Jewish culture. There was nowhere to turn in Poland, not to TSKŻ and not to synagogues in Poland and not to parents and grandparents, so they turned to American books and to friends and colleagues abroad. No one at the time new what would come of these early tentative efforts. The general feeling was rather that the history of Jews in Poland was coming to an end.

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After 1989

The fall of communism in 1989 was a turning point, not only for Jewish life but also for general interest in Jews. A free Poland emerged, and so did new problems, but after 1989, there was freedom to develop Jewish life and close contacts with Jews in Israel and around the world. The most important changes in Jewish life were the increase of Jewish religious communities and emergence of a new generation of young and more confident Jews. A 1997 law that recognized Jewish religious communities as the legal heirs of prewar Jewish communities allowed them to reclaim Jewish communal property. Foreign Jewish organizations could again actively support religious and cultural life. The Joint had returned in 1981 and expanded its activities considerably after 1989. The Lauder Foundation launched wide-ranging activities in 1988, including educational summer camps and later Jewish schools in Warsaw and Wrocław, under the guidance of Rabbi Michael Schudrich, who went on to become the Chief Rabbi of Poland. The Nissenbaum Family Foundation, which began its activity in Poland in 1983, continued to protect Jewish cemeteries. The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, Sigmunt Rolat, and other benefactors from the United States and elsewhere continue to support Jewish life. Indeed, most new developments in Jewish life in Poland, including the vibrant new Jewish Community Centers (JCC) in Kraków and Warsaw, were initiated or are at least supported by individuals, organizations and donors from abroad.

Today there are more than ten rabbis in Poland serving a wide range of congregations: Orthodox, Progressive – for example Etz Chaim synagogue, which is part of the Warsaw Jewish Community (*gmine*), and Beit Warsaw, a separate organization outside of the *gmine* – and Chabad–Lubavitch, a Hasidic congregation. In contrast, during the 1990s, there was only one rabbi or at most two. While most Jews in Poland are not observant , many more take part in religious events than in the 1980s, when only several dozen Jews in all of Poland attended the Passover seder. Today, some thirty years later, a few hundred people take part in home or community seders in Warsaw alone, and more than 400 people, not all of them Jews, came together for the Friday evening Sabbath dinner organized by the Jewish Community Center in Kazimierz during the Kraków Jewish Culture Festival in July 2014.

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The proliferation of Jewish organizations reflects the diversity of Jewish life in Poland today. Older organizations such as TSKŻ and the Jewish Theater, under direction for decades of the late Szymon Szurmiej, continue to operate. The Shalom Foundation, established in 1988 by Gołda Tencer, offers a varied program of Yiddish culture, including the annual Singer Festival in Warsaw. There are organizations for every generation – from the Association of Jewish Veterans and Victims of the Second World War and the Association of the Hidden Children of the Holocaust to the B'nai Brith, which was reestablished in Poland in 2007, and ZOOM, the Polish Jewish Youth Organization. Perhaps the most spectacular expression of the revival of Jewish life are the annual Limud retreats, organized by the Joint, which attract almost 1000 participants from across the Jewish spectrum – secular and religious, old and young, newly converted to Judaism, those just discovering their Jewish roots, and interested non-Jews. Lectures, workshops, religious services, and artistic events take place in parallel sessions throughout the day and evening.

These developments contribute to a process of "de-assimilation" that is enlarging the number of individuals who consider themselves Jewish, and bring greater pluralism and youthfulness to Jewish life. At the same time, the world is open, and young Jews are seeking opportunities in the European Union and elsewhere, and some move to Israel. Whether Jews in Poland will ever reach the critical mass needed for their future remains an open question.

The interest of the Polish public in Jewish history and culture continues to grow, as can be seen in the many books, films, exhibitions, and artistic projects dealing with Jewish subjects and in such actions as the restoration of synagogues and cleaning of cemeteries. This process

began after March 1968 with the Warsaw Club of Catholic Intelligentsia (KIK), which organized the Weeks of Jewish Culture in response to how Jews had been treated in 1968 – many of those associated with KIK would rise to important positions in Polish politics after 1989. The process of internalizing the new Catholic Church teaching of respect for Jews and Judaism was given a boost by Pope John Paul II, who in 1987 met with Polish Jews for the first time. Page 394 In that same year, the first of a series of public debates on recent history took place. In "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," which appeared in the Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Jan Błoński wrote: "One can share the responsibility for the crime without taking part in it . . . Polish soil has been polluted and desecrated, and our duty to purify it remains unfulfilled." There was a backlash: "We fought during the occupation as a nation and as a society. Let no one tell us of our allegedly unfulfilled moral obligations." The debates intensified after the publication in 2000 of *Neighbors*, by Jan Gross, which described how Poles murdered their Jewish neighbors in Jedwabne in 1941, and again after *Fear*, which dealt with the Kielce pogrom in 1946. To the credit of Polish public life, and in contrast with many of its neighboring countries, even the most painful or shameful issues were raised then and continue to be publicly discussed now.

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Freedom after 1989 also created an opening for the expression of antisemitic attitudes, to mention only football fans who use the word *Żyd*, Jew, as an insult, as well as for courageous artistic projects that take up this and other difficult issues in creative ways – to mention only the "laboratory of memory" at Grodzka Gate in Lublin, the Borderlands project in Sejny, and the various efforts dealing with the material heritage of Polish Jews. Synagogues and cemeteries are being preserved, renovated, revitalized, and repurposed by The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODŻ), which was established in 2002 by the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) and local Jewish communities, as well as in towns where no Jews live today, as in Chmielnik, and private foundations such as in the White Stork Synagogue in Wrocław.

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews is itself part of this postwar development and yet another indication that Jews are important to Poland and Poland is important to Jews.